The Chess Game

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The chant on goodwill with which we end the chant every evening starts out, "May I be happy." It's so simple and so basic, and yet we have so many conflicted feelings about that desire. Sometimes we even feel guilty for having that desire, but when you think about it, that's the main aim of people through life: to find happiness, and especially to find a happiness that doesn't let them down, doesn't disappoint them, doesn't turn into something else.

Considering how much effort we put into happiness, you'd think that we'd really be observant and disciplined and very intelligent about how we go about it, yet when you look at the way most people live, that's not the case at all. It's all very hit or miss—a little bit of this, a little bit of that. A large problem is that we're not willing to set priorities in our lives as to what's really important, and what's not quite so important.

A story some of you have heard before: A friend of mine wrote a novel in which a young woman in China suddenly has a very unwelcome stepmother. The stepmother is not a bad person. It's just that the young woman was so upset at her mother's death and had believed her father when he said that he would never marry again. Then all of the sudden he brings this courtesan home as a wife. But the courtesan is an intelligent person, and she sets about trying to win the young girl over.

So one night, while they're playing chess, she tries to teach the girl what she feels is the most important lesson in life, which is that you have to decide that there's one thing you want more than anything else, and you're willing to sacrifice everything else for that one thing. The girl's kind of half-listening, half not-listening as they're playing the game, and she begins to notice that her stepmother's losing pieces all over the place. "Ah, my stepmother's a bad chess player," she thinks, and she starts getting more aggressive in her game. Well, it isn't long before the stepmother actually wins—checkmate—because she had been willing to lose her pieces, trim down her army so that it was a good fighting machine on the chess board. And of course, the way she played chess was illustrating the point she was trying to make.

My friend, the novelist, is also a professor at a university, and every time she publishes a novel, she has to go around to the different alumni clubs and read passages from her novel. In this particular novel, this was the only self-contained passage that she could read in 15, 20 minutes, but she found after a while that nobody wanted to hear the lesson. She had to fall all

over herself to explain, well, the girl learned many other lessons in the novel as well. But she finally got so she had to stop reading the passage to people: Nobody wanted to hear the message. We want to win and keep all our chess pieces. That's why we lack intelligence in our pursuit of happiness.

One of the basic principles in the Buddha's teachings is that if you see that there's a higher or greater form of happiness that you can gain by giving up a lower form of happiness, you have to be willing to give up the lower form—happy to give it up. That's what's hard about the practice. The Buddha was single-minded in his pursuit of true happiness and he wants us to be single-minded, too.

You look at his own life story. He was willing to give up family, power, all kinds of things just because there was this one possibility that there might be a happiness that didn't change, that wasn't subject to aging, illness, and death, that itself was deathless. He threw everything else away. There are the stories they tell about how all of his friends tried to reason with him, how everybody in the family tried to reason with him, saying, "This is ridiculous. Be content with the pleasures that ordinary human beings are content with," but his basic response was, "Well, look at what happens to ordinary human beings: They age, grow ill, and die, and they have to get separated from all the things they love. What do they have then if they haven't found anything of more lasting value within?

So he went out to pursue that single-minded goal, and the story tells us that he found it. So it's a possibility. And as he said, it wasn't because he had any special powers that he found it. They were powers that we could all develop in our own minds if we were resolute and determined enough.

So there is this possibility—and we owe it to ourselves to explore it—that there is a happiness that doesn't change and that we can attain through developing our powers of mind. It requires discipline, it requires mindfulness, but the path itself is not all difficult because it starts by looking at things directly available to our awareness.

The Buddha asks us to take suffering and stress as our first noble truth. In other words, it's the first thing we really should pay attention to, to understand—and not because he's gloomy or pessimistic, but he's just realistic: This is the way most pleasures end up: The things you cling to, no matter how nice they may be, change into something else, and when they change into something else, there's going to be suffering. So he takes the side of life that we don't like to look at, and he basically rubs our nose in it: Just look at this, really try to understand it—the suffering that comes from clinging. Exactly how far does that word *suffering* go? How far

does the stress go?

The reason he does that, he says, is because you learn an awful lot about the mind that way. But he also gives you tools for seeing it very clearly. After all, there are *four* noble truths, and the fourth noble truth is the path to practice, like we were chanting just now. And the essential factor in the path of practice, its heart, the Buddha says, is right concentration.

Get the mind to settle down and be really comfortable here in the present moment. This means we're not only using suffering and pain and stress as a noble truth but we're also using the pleasure that comes from the centered mind: That's a noble truth as well. The whole point is that you learn how to use these things with skill.

For most of us, suffering comes, and we just try to push it away. Pleasure comes, and we try to indulge in it. But the Buddha says to use them as tools to learn more, to go further. The pleasure that comes when the mind is still and at ease: You can develop it. This is what the concentration practice is for as you're working with the breath; trying to keep the breath in mind; keep coming back so that you get more and more familiar with it. You begin to know more of its ins-and-outs. You can create a state of mind that's really willing to look at the truth.

Most of us live in very fragmented minds—damaged minds—especially in modern society. In order to admit the truth about what we've been doing, we first have to heal a lot of those wounds. That's a lot of what concentration practice does. As you settle down, there comes a greater sense of fullness, wholeness, well-being. There's a sense of ease that you can tap into at any time just by focusing on the breath, being on friendly terms with your breath, being on friendly terms with your body in the present moment, getting to know it really intimately. Once you have that sense of well-being, then you can really turn and look at this whole issue of suffering and stress, and not feel threatened by the questions—because after all, the Buddha is telling us to look at what the mind is doing to cause that stress, which is something we usually don't want to see.

Our normal reaction is to go out and blame our suffering on somebody else or something outside, but he says the real cause is there in the mind. Now, if the mind is already feeling haggard and fragmented as it is, it's not going to want to hear this, but once you start to deal with a sense of well-being—a sense of wholeness that comes from getting the mind concentrated, getting it centered and focused here in the present, in a comfortable way—it's a lot easier to admit the truth about what's going on, and to look objectively at this problem of suffering and stress.

The Buddha said our normal reaction to it is twofold. One is that we're bewildered by it

because it seems to come out of nowhere and can come at any time. Two, we search for a way out, wondering if there's somebody who knows a way or two for how to get beyond this suffering. That's our common reaction. So first there's bewilderment, and then there's a question, a search.

The problem is for most of us is that the way we question issues of suffering and pain doesn't frame the questions very well. We frame them out of ignorance and bewilderment, so our questions, instead of helping us get beyond suffering and stress, often actually compound the problem, leading us into more suffering, more stress. So to gain insight, the Buddha recommends a regimen of questions, and one of them is just looking at the stress, the sensation of stress, in and of itself, and ask, "Okay. What else comes along with us?"

In other words, instead of blaming yourself or blaming other people, try to see what other actions are there in the mind whenever there's suffering and stress? What seems to underlie it? You drop the issue of who's at fault. In fact, you drop the issue of whether there's anybody there at all. You don't say that there isn't anyone, you don't say that there is. You just say, "Okay what's happening?" Look at the mind in terms of cause and effect, use that problem of stress and suffering as a tool to dig a little bit deeper into the mind. What else is going on in there?

And he says to look for the clinging. What kinds of clinging are there? Rhe big one is clinging to your sense of self. Why do you identify with that suffering and stress? Can you experience it without identifying with it, without saying that it's "me" or "mine"? Can you experience it without clinging? And what happens to the sensations? Say that there's a physical pain: What happens to that physical pain—your relationship to that physical pain—if you can drop the sense of the "me" or the "mine" there? What happens if you drop the various labels you put on it?

In other words, you look at the issue not in terms of who's at blame, but just, "What's going on here?" Are there any patterns of behavior you can detect? When you start asking those questions, then you're getting on the right track to seeing that it's not necessary to cling to these things. It's not necessary to identify with them, starting with the body on to feelings, mind states, the whole works: All the things that we usually tend to identify with.

If you can learn to experience them without identifying with them, see what happens. In this sense, the meditation is not so much reprogramming the mind—saying you've got to believe this, believe that, and if you can make yourself believe something or make yourself see these things in these terms, you're going to be awakened. It's not that. He said to ask about this, ask this question, ask that question. It's more like a treasure hunt. Is there something valuable

in here? You pick up this thing and look at it. Well, no, that's not really valuable. You put it aside. Is the next thing worth holding on to? Well, you look it up, look at it, pick it up. No, that's not worth holding onto, either. Go through everything you tend to hold onvto until you are finally able to get the mind into a state where it doesn't have to hold on to anything anymore.

The state of concentration and mindfulness into which you've put the mind gives it a sense of well-being, a sense of strength so that you get more and more independent with regard to things you used to feel you had to lean on. You realize you don't have to. You realize that the mind is greatly freed as you learn how to let go, until ultimately it's taken care of everything else. Then you turn around and learn how it pry loose your attachments to that state of concentration. You let things go in the proper order.

Many people are afraid of getting attached to concentration. As soon as the mind settles down for a little bit, feels good, "Whoops, got to let that go." That aborts the whole path right there. You've got to have a strong sense of concentration, a strong sense of ease, that's both mindful and clear so that you can see where the mind is attached to the body, so that you can see where it's attached to mental states, or you can see where there's this attachment to the concept of the mind itself. Start taking them apart. Once you've taken everything else apart, then you take apart your attachment to the concentration.

So, basically, what we're learning here is a skillful approach to the question of what is true happiness, and we discover that, as the mind gets strengthened, it finally arrives at a happiness that doesn't have to depend on anything, a happiness that doesn't change. That's the kind of happiness that doesn't let you down, and everyone who's attained it says there's nothing else in the world that can compare. No matter how difficult the practice is, no matter how long it takes, how many false starts, all the problems you have to deal with, once you finally get there, there's no regret whatsoever. It was worth all the sacrifices.

So that's what happens when you take the issue of happiness—which you think everybody would take seriously—and you actually do take it seriously. Look into it, be very systematic, use all your powers of your intelligence to look into this question, and whatever you see that the practice demands, be willing to meet its demands. That's the kind of dedication, that's the kind of interest that the issue demands, that it requires—and it more than pays off.